2023

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Introduction

      For the past ten years, social networking sites and mobile apps have become increasingly

influential as mechanisms through which socialization occurs, particularly for adolescents and

young adults (e.g., Ellison et al.; McLean et al.; Trekels et al.; Tiggemann et al.). However, the

influence and effects of social media may be even more harmful than traditional media (e.g., TV,

magazines) because information and images are always available for others to access and

evaluate, increasing user's awareness of how they appear to (and are perceived by) others on

these sites (Baker et al.; Hanna et al.; Saiphoo and Vahedi). Further, because of the ocularcentric

nature of social media, photos are essential components of personal narratives, self-promotion,

and the projection of a positive self-image, so users may engage in frequent self-monitoring and

impression management as they come to view themselves from this objectified, third-person

perspective (Hanna et al.; Trekels et al.; Ward et al.). In fact, studies investigating social media,

such as Facebook and Instagram, have demonstrated that usage is related to greater levels of

body shame, appearance ideal internalization (i.e., adopting ideals as one's own), objectified

body consciousness (i.e., experiencing the body as an object), and body dissatisfaction (Baker et

al. 280; Bell et al.; Brown and Tiggemann; Fox and Rooney; Hanna et al.; Trekels et al.).

With the social media boom of the early 2000s, even dating moved online, making online

dating the second more popular way to explore romance and meet a significant other in the

United States (Fetters; Keufler). Tinder is a California-based American mobile app that was

launched in 2012 as a new form of dating for Millennials (Iqbal). As a privately owned

company, it generated $1.6 billion in revenue in 2021 (Iqbal). The cultural phenomenon that is

Tinder was the brainchild of University of Southern California classmates, Sean Rad and Justin

Mateen who understood in 2004 that mobile platforms were the future for social connections

(Stampler). At its inception, the overwhelming majority of Tinder users were college-aged (i.e.,

18 to 24), but in less than two years the age demographics expanded (Iqbal; Stampler).

Nevertheless, the U.S. is still the largest contributor to Tinder's revenue, clearly demonstrating

its significance to American culture. Despite its numerous competitors, Tinder dominates the

U.S. market share for online dating apps with 32.32% of the market. Bumble is second with

22.22% of the online dating market and Plenty of Fish constitutes 15.15% of the market share

(Iqbal).

Tinder has redefined romance and "relationship economy" within American culture by

shifting the dating scene to smartphones (Fetters), but it also has its downsides, such as the social

disconnect that comes with the relative anonymity of the app. "Swiping" has become as much a

part of Americana as the app has become synonymous with "ghosting", causal hook-ups and

appearance-based matchmaking (Proudfoot). In 2022, the app has over 75 million monthly

active users, of which 10 million are active daily (Iqbal). Tinder matches are made based on

individuals" GPS locations and Facebook pages, and if individuals like the abbreviated profile

(and photos) of the other person, they swipe right. To swipe left means they "pass" on that

profile. If both individuals like the other (i.e., swipe right), then Tinder puts the two users into

contact, allowing them to begin communicating. Despite its reputation as a hook-up site and

overt use of appearance as the *primary* basis for connection, Tinder is quite popular, especially

for males who account for over 75% of the users in the United States (Iqbal). Although

validation from other users in the form of likes and right swipes can confirm self-worth, being

judged, evaluated, and objectified on Tinder also may create more reasons for individuals to be

conscious about their appearance. The constant self-monitoring can lead to various negative

outcomes (e.g., anxiety, body dissatisfaction).

Tinder Motivations

According to the tenets of uses and gratification theory (U&G; Katz et al.; Ruggiero),

users will be driven to use media that will fulfil a need or fill a void in the life of the user. The

selection and usage of forms of media, including social networking sites/apps, are ultimately

determined by social-psychological factors and the potential for positive outcomes and

satisfaction (i.e., gratification) that is experienced by users in relation to their use of media.

Since the inception of mobile apps in the early 2000s, scholars have examined the draw

of such platforms that have transformed our approach to committed romantic relationships

(Carpenter and McEwan; Sumter et al.; Timmermans and De Caluwé). Despite ample criticism

for its apparent superficiality, Tinder has changed the face of contemporary dating in America.

However, scholars have found that people are increasingly using online dating sites and/or

mobile apps for reasons that contradict previously suggested ideas about such sites (e.g., Sumter

et al.; Timmermans and De Caluwé; Ward). Studies that have examined patterns and

motivations for use of Tinder (e.g., Carpenter and McEwan; Ranzini and Lutz; Sumter et al.;

Tanner & Huggins) have found that entertainment, passing time, or self-distraction were the

strongest motives for usage. Unsurprisingly, self-validation, boosting one's ego, excitement, and

even trendiness have also topped the list of reasons (Sumter et al. 72). There are people who do

undeniably use the app for seeking hook-ups, but Sumter et al. (72) indicated that love appeared

to be a stronger motivation to use Tinder than the casual sex motivation.

A person's motivation to use Tinder may change over time and may be mediated by other

factors, such as gender, age, and even personality. For example, Timmermans and De Caluwé

(76-77) found that extroverts are more likely to use Tinder, and users high in neuroticism (i.e.,

anxiety) were most likely to have social approval and sexual experience motivations for using

Tinder (Timmermans and De Caluwé 77). Several studies have also demonstrated differences

between men's and women's usage of the app (e.g., Carpenter and McEwan; Tyson et al.). In

line with literature on online dating, men were more likely to report a Casual Sex motivation for

using Tinder than women (Carpenter and McEwan; Sumter et al. 73). Furthermore, men more

frequently reported Ease of Communication and Thrill of Excitement motives for using Tinder

(Sumter et al. 73). Regardless of the individual motivation media (e.g., Tinder) is meant to fulfil

a gratification or need.

The Tinder Effect

Regardless of a person's motivation to use Tinder, the focus on appearance and

impression management has the tendency to make users overly sensitized to how they appear to

others (Strübel and Petrie, "Love me Tinder"; Strübel and Petrie, "Tinder Use"). Because of the

sheer number of users seeking connections, users can be more selective, thereby reinforcing the

importance of physical appearance and the pressure to be attractive (e.g., Heino et al. 434-438).

However, this may also reinforce heightened self-awareness of one's appearance,

depersonalization, and self-objectification to appeal to potential matches. Such self-

objectification is directly related to body shame and body dissatisfaction and may lead users,

especially women, to post sexualized images of themselves to seek validation of self and

appearance (Meier and Gray). For example, Strübel and Petrie ("Love me Tinder" 36-37) found

that regardless of gender, Tinder users displayed higher levels of internalization, body

surveillance, and body shame than did non-users.

Objectification theory (e.g., Fredrickson and Roberts; McKinley) proposes that when

women and men compare themselves to the generally unattainable appearance ideals that are

presented in the media, and subsequently fall short of the standard of beauty, they are vulnerable

to experiencing a range of body image concerns as well as psychological distress, including low

self-esteem (e.g., Hanna et al.; Hawes et al.; He et al.). Although most studies have focused on

women, exposure to (self-) objectifying messages on appearance related social media (and

pressures) socializes both women and men to believe that their self-worth is defined by their

sexualized appearance, which may lead to a decline in overall mental health and self-perception

(e.g., Hanna et al.). For example, Strübel and Petrie ("Love me Tinder" 37) found that Tinder

users also exhibited lower levels of self-esteem compared with non-users. Other studies (e.g.,

Hawes et al.; Holtzhausen et al.) have also found that users often exhibit higher levels of

psychological distress, anxiety, and depression.

Tinder Benefits

Consistent with uses and gratification theory (Katz et al.), studies have demonstrated the

benefits of social media, including dating platforms, by certain individuals providing social

connections and a sense of belonging that may not occur offline because of lack of opportunity

or even social anxieties (e.g., Ellison et al.; Steinfeld et al.). Social media platforms may provide

a virtual space for people with similar interests to come together, build and maintain

relationships, and facilitate communication and social well-being.

As with other forms of social media, Tinder usage and subsequent self-objectification

may invite positive feedback about users' physical appearance (e.g., Cavazos-Rehg et al.). In

fact, self-validation was determined to be the most important psychological predictors for Tinder

usage (Ranzini and Lutz). Involvement on dating apps, such as Tinder can be beneficial for

users who have low self-esteem to find quick gratification through social approval in the form of

a right swipe (i.e., extrinsic reward). Tinder may also be useful for people who feel lonely and

simply want an easily accessible and informal form of socializing (Ranzini and Lutz; Tanner and

Huggins). For example, Timmermans and De Caluwé (77) found that people with lower levels

of extroversion are more likely to utilize Tinder to improve their social skills, because the app

creates a relatively "safer environment where individuals whom fear being judged and evaluated

negatively" (Timmermans and De Caluwé 77).

Purpose

Given the popularity of Tinder as well as its focus on physical appearance, I was interested in examining at what motivates men and women to have a profile on and interact through the dating app. Through the framework of objectification theory and uses and gratification theory and using a qualitative methods approach, I looked at self-reported motivations for joining Tinder, experiences meeting people from the app, and users" thoughts and feelings about themselves after using the app.

Method

Participants

In the current study, a total of 234 Tinder users (M_{age} = 20.50) provided responses to six open-ended questions in an online survey. The sample is composed of 175 (74.5%) women and 59 (25.1%) men; 55.3% White/NonHispanic, 21.3% White/Hispanic, 8.5% Asian American, and 6.8% Black/African American all residing in the United States.

After receiving university IRB approval, I recruited participants via class announcements and a departmental research recruitment website (i.e., SONA) to participate in an online survey of social media use and psychological functioning using the Qualtrics survey platforms. Participants were recruited from two private and two public universities located in three geographic areas of the U.S.

Data Collection and Analysis

Study participants provided responses to how using Tinder made them *feel and think* about themselves. Of the total 234 Tinder users, 126 participants (women= 96; men = 30) also responded to questions about physically meeting someone from Tinder face-to-face, and then described their meeting experience(s).

Deductive and inductive thematic analysis was utilized for analyzing and interpreting patterns of meaning in the participant responses about their Tinder usage. Before examining the data, deductive themes were created from the research questions and terms, theories, and conditions described in the existing literature on Tinder (e.g., Strübel and Petrie, "Love me Tinder"; Sumter et al.; Timmermans and Caluwé).

The inductive themes evolved from the data after several additional phases of coding by the author (Bazeley; Braun and Clarke; Clarke 297; Strauss and Corbin). In the first phase of inductive coding (open coding) key thematic categories were identified based on disassembling the responses provided by the participants. A summary of phrases and terms were then reduced in the axial (second) phase of coding. Lastly, a third and final phase of coding reduction was completed when the author identified patterns of interaction between codes, duplications were omitted, and coding categories collapsed into central phenomenon thereby resulting in the final scheme. Samples for each coding category can also be found in Table 1.

Three undergraduate students enrolled in a special topics research class were given the responses from the three open-ended questions and final coding scheme after a two-hour training session on coding. The first author clarified the categories, and the students independently coded the participants" responses. Inter-coder agreement was calculated using Holsti's Formula (Holsti), and the reliability of the coding process was calculated using Cohen's Kappa (κ; Cohen). theory from literature on social media and body image to interpret the findings.

Data Reliability

The first open-ended question asked participants to, "Describe how you think and feel about yourself as a result of using Tinder". The codes were based solely on intuitive deduction. Inter-coder agreement for this section ranged from 87%-98%. The reliability measures across 7

response categories ranged between κ = 0.65 (*substantial agreement*) and κ = 0.92 (*almost perfect agreement*; Viera and Garrett 362)

For those individuals who met someone on Tinder (N=126), the motivation for meeting someone and what the meeting experience(s) was/were like were coded. Inter-coder agreement for this section ranged from 91%-100%.   The reliability across response categories ranged from fair reliability (κ = 0.40) to perfect agreement (κ =1.00; Viera and Garrett).

Findings

The descriptive results for the thematic analysis of the three open-ended questions are discussed below. The comprehensive results for all coded items are summarized in Table 1.

Thoughts and Feelings About the Self as a Tinder User

The responses concerning thoughts and feelings about the self were first categorized as positive, negative, neutral, or experienced both positive and negative feelings due to multiple meetings. More specific themes subsequently emerged from each category with respect to how participants thought and felt about themselves as a result of using Tinder.

Women

The majority of women (32.6%) felt more positively about themselves after having used Tinder. For women users, Tinder helped to elevate their self-esteem, self-perceptions of attractiveness, or make them more confident, followed by general positive feelings about themselves. For example, one person claimed, "I feel pretty empowered and more secure about how attractive I am" (Woman, 22 years old). Another indicated, "I have more confidence in myself" (Woman, 23 years old).

Women, although to a lesser degree (20.6%), also experienced negative feelings about themselves as a result of using Tinder:

I feel guilty for using it, as if I use it because I am not a good enough person to attract or

be attracted to people I already know, or am too afraid or worthless to meet people

organically. (Woman, 20 years old).

Sometimes the negative sentiment is one of shame, desperation, and embarrassment: "[I

feel] weird because of the negative connotations associated with the app. It made me think less

of myself for a while and i was embarrassed for others to know" (Woman, 25 years old).

Sometimes I believe it makes me seem desperate. I try not to log on very often.

I did not use Tinder for that long because I felt anxious when reaching out to chat with

people I did not know (Woman, 25 years old).

Several women specifically cited feelings of objectification while using Tinder in their

open-ended responses:

[I feel] very sad, guys treat me like meat, or an object (Woman, 19 years old).

It made me feel horrible and disgusting. Like the only thing I am good for is my physical

appearance, which I am not even that confident in. I felt like I was not worthy in any

man's eyes as an intellectual, but solely there for his desires and pleasures (Woman, 24

years old).

I feel that I am sometimes more self conscious of how I look because I know hundreds of

men are constantly on there judging me by my appearance (Woman, 24 years old).

Men

The majority of men (32.2%) responded that Tinder made them feel or think negatively

about themselves. In fact, usage was associated with more self-reported distress, depression and

negative mood. The shame and hurt one experiences as a result of rejection and "ghosting" (e.g.,

when a potential romantic contact just ceases communication, such as not returning texts) is a

common discussion theme on other social media platforms, such as Reddit. Tinder users put

themselves in an emotionally vulnerable position and face increased odds of being rejected

("swiped left") by these potential romantic connections: "It feels like a pathetic thing to use even

though most people have tried it" (Man, 22 years old). One even acknowledged how it has

changed him in a negative light:

> I feel like I've started looking at people as disposable, as far as a partner goes. Scared to
>
> connect because there could be someone else out there who's better and I could be
>
> wasting my time with the wrong person. What's funny is everyone seems like the wrong
>
> person. Helped me realize my fear of commitment, or just my fear of attempting a
>
> relationship currently.(Man, 21 years old).

Even for those individuals with generally high levels of esteem, the current Tinder system

does not appear to work in their favor and may result in a diminished sense of self after repeated

use.   One participant said, "After having Tinder, I feel even more unsatisfied in appearance. I

feel uninteresting and not good enough" (Man, 25 years old). Several participants talked about

the need to take "breaks" from Tinder or limiting the amount of time they spend on it because of

how poorly it makes them feel about themselves, "It is great for increasing validation through

women, but can be unhealthy for self worth at times because it becomes almost addicting" (Man,

27 years old).

For men, the second most common subcategory of negative thoughts pertained

specifically to thoughts about the body and overall attractiveness. Such negative experiences are

consistent with quantitative findings that have shown lower levels of self-esteem and higher

levels of body surveillance, body shame, disordered eating in Tinder users compared with non-

users (e.g., Strübel and Petrie, "Love me Tinder"; Tran et al.). "I feel a little less motivated in my

body image as a result of using the app" (Man, 19 years old). "After having Tinder, I feel even more unsatisfied in appearance. I feel uninteresting and not good enough" (Man, 25 years old).

Men were not as likely to experience positive thoughts and feelings after using Tinder (25.4%). And several agreed with their female counterparts that Tinder is a useful platform for boosting one's ego, "I don't feel bad about using it. If anything, it is empowering because you get to find out who finds you attractive" (Man, 23 years old).

Neutral Thoughts and Feelings

Many participants had neutral or indifferent thoughts and feelings about themselves after using Tinder (28.2%)., most likely as a result of meeting a variety of different people and receiving diverse feedback on the app. For example, one participant stated, "Indifferent. I'm kinda neutral about Tinder. People use it for different things and it doesn't make a difference to me" (Man, 19 years old). For younger adults (e.g., Gen Z and Millennials), the use of dating apps to connect with others is normalized behavior, and not always in a meaningful way: "I think I'm a normal young adult who uses a popular app. It doesn't make a difference to me" (Woman, 20 years old).   One participant expressed her indifference as thoughts of herself with the following comment, "I think that I'm beautiful, at least to me, but I definitely question if other people really think so" (Woman, 21 years old).

Motivation

The current study revealed eight primary motivations for using and meeting someone from the Tinder app in order of prevalence: (1) interpersonal connections, (2) physical attraction, (3) socialization and friendship, (4) self-validation, (5) fun and entertainment, (6) distraction and curiosity, (7) relationship seeking, and (8) sex and hook-ups.

Interpersonal Connection

The overwhelming majority of users, both men and women, said that they met someone from Tinder because they felt an initial social/emotional connection to them one that went beyond physical attraction, which supports prior studies claiming that Tinder has evolved beyond the traditional notions of a hook-up site. Many users discussed connecting via texts and phone conversations, "We hit it off, they were very nice and we talked a lot" (Man, 22 years old).

Physical Attraction

Many users admittedly said they met the other person because of the physical attractiveness of the other person, which was often a precursor to meeting up for a hook-up, "They are attractive. That is the primary purpose; to find someone attractive to meet" (Man, 27 years old).

Socialization and Friendship

As with other forms of social media, Tinder may also afford users an opportunity for social connection with others, thereby potentially reducing isolation and depression (e.g., Steinfeld et al.). Similar to prior studies (e.g., Tanner and Huggins), participants in the current study claimed to meet people from Tinder because they were looking to meet new people or to broaden their socialization network.

Self-Validation

Tinder has been established as a common source of instant social gratification for users. The findings of the current study demonstrate that despite its reputation as a judgmental platform, Tinder may actually help some users to elevate self-esteem via Tinder matches that hypothetically physical attractiveness. Interestingly, approximately half of the Tinder users in this study (n=110) never met someone, so perhaps for them Tinder fulfilled their need for validation without a face-to-face interaction:

I use it to see how attractive people find me, and when I get a lot of matches I feel

confident. If I don't then I will change my profile to see what will get me more matches.

(Woman, 21 years old)

I feel a bit more confident than I did before. I feel like I may have felt some validation

from having the majority of people swipe right for my profile. (Woman, 27 years old)

I generally just use tinder because I like to match with people and see what they have to

say because it boosts my ego. (Woman, 21 years old)

Fun and Entertainment

The current study presents a similar narrative to existing studies (e.g., Carpenter and

McEwan; Fowler and Both; Sumter et al.; Timmermans and De Caluwé) that suggest people use

Tinder primarily for fun or entertainment purposes, and therefore, it may not have an enduring

impact on global self-concept. Several participants who failed to answer the qualitative

questions about how Tinder usage made them feel and think about themselves focused on

justification or explanation for their usage of the app as a form of entertainment without any

intention of meeting someone face-to-face:

Its just a fun thing to do nothing serious (Man, 21 years old).

Main use for me was for fun and meeting new people outside of my circle of friends

(Woman, 23 years old).

To Pass the Time/Distraction/Curiosity

Related to entertainment, some people use Tinder like they would any other game app.

Tinder is not necessarily used for creating connections with other, but rather the endless swiping

presents a means to pass the time when bored. For others, the anonymity of Tinder allows them

to satiate their curiosity by mindlessly swiping through users. For example, one woman (20 years

old) said, "Im just a nosey person that wants to see who i know in person is on tinder".

Relationship Seeking

A smaller segment of users did claim to use Tinder for relationship seeking purposes,

indicating that Tinder has redefined dating for younger generations. And as with Sumter et al.,

slightly more men were seeking relationships on Tinder compared with women. For example,

one man (23 years old) said, "We had a lot of common interest. [I] saw the other person as a

potential partner".

Sex and Hook-ups

Despite popular views of Tinder as a hook-up app, only a small minority of participants

in the current study admitted to using the app to arrange casual sex. Users acknowledge that

sexual permissiveness did occasionally motivate their usage of Tinder, but it was not necessarily

the only reason for using the app, "[I used Tinder] to have a good time, meet someone new, have

sex, possibly pursue a romantic relationship" (Woman, 20 years old). The results of the current

study support prior research that demonstrates Tinder users are not necessarily using the app for

short-term sexual opportunities (Fowler and Both; Sumter et al.; Tanner and Huggins).

Tinder Experience

The majority of participants, both men and women, described their experiences of

meeting someone from Tinder as "positive" (70.9%). Within the positive category, the majority

of participants described generally positive experiences without conveying specific details. For

example, one participant "It was a fun and relaxing. The girl was really down to earth and laid

back". The next most popular positive experience was that the Tinder meeting resulted in a

lasting friendship. Negative experiences (11.3%; e.g., "It was somewhat uncomfortable") rated

last after both positive and negative experiences (12.1%; e.g., "Few positives and a few

negatives, just how it is in dating") and neutral Tinder experiences (4%; e.g., "It was neutral").

Conclusions

Although Tinder is redefining dating for younger generations, the app has been

established as a common source of social gratification for users. The findings of the current study

demonstrate that Tinder can help users to elevate their self-esteem via Tinder matches that may

affirm physical attractiveness. As with other forms of social media, Tinder may also afford users

an opportunity for social connection with others, thereby potentially reducing isolation and

depression, and providing an innocuous form of entertainment (e.g., Steinfeld et al.).

The current study presents a similar narrative to existing studies (e.g., Katz et al.;

Timmermans and De Caluwé) that suggest people use Tinder primarily for interpersonal fun or

entertainment, and therefore, it may not have an enduring impact on global self-concept. The

participants in the current study reported primarily positive experiences, which supports the idea

that Tinder offers more than just a hook-up culture. Rather, the findings imply that Tinder is

innocuous form of socialization for young adults. Their positive experiences may also explain

why users had elevated thoughts and feelings about themselves after having used Tinder.

According to uses and gratification theory media usage may help users to realize affective and

social interactive needs, such as entertainment, surveillance, and interpersonal relationships

(Ruggiero; Sundar and Limperos). Tinder is a platform where users can self-present idealized,

carefully selected versions of themselves with hopes of receiving appearance confirmation and

positive feedback.

Nonetheless, there are potential insidious outcomes associated with the dating app. The

platform has a reputation for making people feel disposable in a sea of carefully curated profiles.

Several participants specifically cited feelings of being valued as an object based on physical and sexual attractiveness (i.e., objectification) while using Tinder. Such objectifying/sexualizing experiences subsequently lead to an internalization of beauty ideals and valuation of appearance over other personal characteristics, which encourages self-objectification. The findings of the current study suggest that exposure to sexualized media impacts men's and women's objectified self-concept. The negative self-evaluation comments provided by participants predominantly alluded to their bodies and overall appearance. As found in prior studies (Karsay et al.; Ward et al.) men and women are equally vulnerable to being sexualized and scrutinized by others on Tinder. Even for those individuals with generally high levels of esteem, the current Tinder system does not appear to work in their favor and may result in a diminished sense of self after repeated use.

All things considered, contemporary views of Tinder bear reconsideration. Although the app has a reputation as a platform for superficiality, entertainment, and hook-ups, we should also consider the fact that Tinder reflects a generational shift in dating. Not only has dating moved online, Tinder has also revolutionized and casualized the world of dating in the United States.

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